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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 003961

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: ABDULLAH FADES, RABBANI EMERGES; STRONG OPPOSITION  
PARTY UNLIKELY

REF: A. KABUL 3478

[1](#)B. KABUL 3494

Classified By: Acting PolCouns V. Alvarado reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Although former presidential candidate Dr. Abdullah Abdullah rose from virtually nothing to prominence during the elections, he has since noticeably faded from the Afghan political scene, as Rabbani moves out of the shadows to exert his influence with President Karzai for ministerial and other senior government positions. Even Abdullah's campaign chief has told us that "anything that Abdullah says are actually Rabbani's words," and, "without Rabbani, who is Abdullah?" In traditional Afghan fashion, the former Abdullah-supporters have deftly switched sides, this time returning to their former patrons -- MP Professor Rabbani, Balkh Governor Atta, and Lower House Speaker Qanooni. If this trend holds, a strong Abdullah-led loyal opposition is unlikely. End Summary.

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ABDULLAH, THE SACRIFICIAL LAMB  
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[1](#)2. (C) Dr. Abdullah entered the presidential election against Karzai with limited name recognition, a reputation as an elitist whose family resides in India, and as a pro-Panjshiri Tajik -- all of which restricted his ability to run a strong national campaign. However, Abdullah rose to prominence during the campaigns, proving himself as a rational leader, and in particular, astutely managing his international image and campaign. Even Karzai told us Abdullah ran a better campaign. Abdullah is considering starting a political party or movement, and due to the elections, will enjoy more support now than before. However, during the elections and after, many pundits told us Abdullah was being used as the "sacrificial lamb" of the true Tajik powerhouses (reftels). Many said these powerbrokers, specifically Rabbani, Qanooni, the Massoud brothers, and Governor Atta, knew that a United Front victory in 2009 was impossible. Therefore, these Northern powerbrokers did not want to run, nor put their key supporters' faces out front. Instead, they chose to wait to run until after Karzai's second term.

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UF COALITION FRAGMENTATION  
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[1](#)3. (C) Instead of supporting Abdullah, some key Tajik supporters opted instead to back Karzai, the perceived winner, causing significant fragmentation within the former United Front coalition. Some of the influential Tajiks that decided to join Karzai included First Vice President Fahim Khan, Ismael Khan, MP Fazal Aimaq, MP and former Deputy Interior Minister General Helal, as well as influential and occasional United Front collaborators like the Uzbek Junbesh Party and the some of the Hazara Wahdat parties. Although

these leaders continue to sympathize with Abdullah's support base, most of them tell us they made a practical decision to remain with Karzai to obtain jobs and influence. They have also voiced concern that Abdullah was compromised by his acceptance of Iranian funding for his campaign.

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RABBANI EMERGES  
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14. (C) Former Abdullah campaign chief Satar Murad sang Abdullah's praises during the campaign period, but on December 3, he revealed himself as a Rabbani follower. He told us that, "anything that comes out of Abdullah's mouth now are Rabbani's words," and "who is Abdullah without Rabbani?" Murad served in the Foreign Ministry under former President Rabbani, and was the governor of Kapisa until Karzai fired him in 2007 for speaking out against government policies. Over the last month, Rabbani's son Salahuddin has shared with us the details of Rabbani's negotiations with President Karzai, and although always respectful when referring to Abdullah, he made clear that Rabbani was leading these negotiations. This has spoiled Abdullah's plan to negotiate for policy changes like decentralization and allowing the Afghan people to vote for governors, since Rabbani is pushing for positions, not policies.

15. (C) MP Faizullah Zaki (Uzbek, Jawzjan) told us December 3 that the Abdullah campaign was merely Rabbani's attempt to show his strength to Karzai, and impress upon him that Rabbani remained a powerful force capable of mobilizing across Afghanistan's regions and ethnicities. Murad further

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said, "Abdullah was given a job. Now that job is over." Zaki claimed most consider Rabbani's plan successful, noting that Rabbani would likely receive several cabinet level positions for his supporters. (Note: Rabbani continues to advocate for a position for his son Salahuddin Rabbani. End Note.)

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OPPOSITION PARTY UNLIKELY  
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16. (C) Most Afghan politicians voice skepticism that Abdullah will ever start a political party or movement without the Tajik commanders Rabbani, Balkh Governor Atta, Fahim Khan, in addition to the Shomali Plain commanders. Abdullah campaign supporter and occasional European Union consultant Farooq Bashir told us December 3 that the Shomali commanders want to separate from the Panjshiri power base, and Vice President Fahim Khan in particular, so they can expand their influence within Tajik circles. This further indicates that the Tajik base will remain fragmented, and unable to rally around Abdullah or any other individual. Instead, the United Front will remain divided by patron, with at least six factions: Rabbani, Qanooni, Fahim Khan, the Massoud brothers, Ismail Khan, and Abdullah. This reality makes the chances of a strong Abdullah-led loyal opposition unlikely.

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INAUGURATION BOYCOTT CONTRIBUTED TO ABDULLAH'S ISOLATION  
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17. (C) Murad claimed that Abdullah was promised that after the elections he would be given a role as the head of a government reform commission, but noted that this had not materialized. He suggested that Abdullah's decision not to attend President Karzai's inauguration contributed to this turn of events. Zaki said it was standard behavior that Rabbani refuse Karzai, due to his stronger political and jihadi position, and the fact that he was still negotiating with Karzai. However, due to Qanooni and Abdullah's more formal relationship to Karzai, as the Speaker of the Lower

House and Karzai's former Foreign Minister and presidential race rival, respectively, it was more unusual that they did not attend out of courtesy.

18. (C) Comment: Beyond the loss of much of Abdullah's support base due to Rabbani actions, Abdullah is perceived by many to remain an elitist and a distant personality. It remains unclear how he would fund a political party, whether or not he is willing to use his personal funds, leave his family in India, and slog through the mundane process of creating a party. The 2010 Parliamentary elections would provide an opportunity for Abdullah to recruit MPs under his umbrella and further solidify his support base, but due to the recent United Front's further fragmentation and decision to join Karzai, and the increased chance that the 2010 Parliamentary elections will be postponed for at least a year, Abdullah will likely lose momentum. If this occurs, Abdullah may further fade from the political scene. End Comment.

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